Mandali Venkata Krishna Rao

Mandali Venkata Krishna Rao (4 August 1926 – 27 September 1997) was an Indian politician, social worker, and cultural leader from Andhra Pradesh. A committed Gandhian, he served as a Member of Parliament (MP) in the 2nd Lok Sabha and as a Cabinet Minister in the Andhra Pradesh state government holding various portfolios.

Widely regarded as the **"Diviseema Gandhi"** and the architect of modern Diviseema, he played a pivotal role in promoting Telugu language and culture globally, organizing the first **World Telugu Conference** (*Prapancha Telugu Mahasabhalu*) in 1975. He was also known for his extensive disaster relief efforts following the devastating 1977 Diviseema cyclone.

Early Life and Family Background

Mandali Venkata Krishna Rao was born on 4 August 1926 in Pallewada, a village on the banks of Kolleru Lake in the Kaikaluru taluk of Krishna district, Andhra Pradesh.

Ancestry

His family traces its roots to Anegonde in the Vijayanagara Empire. Members of the *Gandhapala* gotra, his ancestors served as military commanders (*Senanayakas*) under the rulers of Hampi-Vijayanagara. Around 1520 CE, his ancestor Chinapotineedu migrated to Puligadda in Diviseema, establishing the family lineage in the region.

Krishna Rao's paternal grandparents, Venkatappayya and Krishnavenamma, were prominent philanthropists who donated most of their vast land holdings to construct a Rama temple and host community feasts (*santharpana*) for the poor. His maternal grandfather, Dutta Ramayya, was a wealthy land and livestock owner known for providing continuous hospitality and milk to travelers.

Youth and Education

Krishna Rao was named by combining the names of his paternal grandparents. Raised with affection by his aunt Pichamma, he completed his early schooling in Pallewada before moving to Bhavadevarapalli to study under his father, Venkatramayya, an idealist schoolteacher and Gandhian social reformer.

He completed his Secondary School Leaving Certificate (SSLC) at the Board High School in Avanigadda. To attend school, he walked eight miles daily from Bhavadevarapalli. He completed his higher education and graduated from the Hindu College in Machilipatnam (Bandar).

Indian Independence Movement

Influenced by his father and regional leaders like Gottipati Brahmaiah, Krishna Rao joined the freedom movement as a student:

- **Individual Satyagraha (1941):** As a high school student, he organized fellow students to garland Satyagrahis in Avanigadda, earning beatings from the British police.

- **National Student Union (1942):** He was elected president of the local National Student Union.
- **Quit India Movement (1943):** On 9 August 1943, he was arrested for hoisting national flags on telegraph poles and trees along the Krishna River. As he was a minor, police released him after a reprimand.
- **Student Congress (1945):** Elected organizing secretary of the Krishna District Student Congress, he helped conduct the Andhra Vidyarthi Saraswata Kalasala under N. G. Ranga. That same year, he traveled to Bombay without informing his family to meet Mahatma Gandhi at Birla House.

Following Indian independence, Krishna Rao served as President of the Krishna District Youth Congress (1948–1952) and Secretary of the District Congress Committee (1952–1956). He also directed local initiatives for Vinoba Bhave's *Bhoodan Movement*.

Political Career

Member of Parliament (1957–1962)

In the 2nd Lok Sabha general elections (1957), Chief Minister Neelam Sanjiva Reddy and the Pradesh Congress Committee selected 31-year-old Krishna Rao to contest the Bandar (Machilipatnam) Parliamentary seat. Defeating strong opposition, he won by a 7,000-vote margin, dismantling a communist stronghold. He was one of the youngest MPs in the 2nd Lok Sabha. During his tenure, he was praised by Speaker M. Ananthasayanam Ayyangar for his humility and dedication to the poor.

Key Parliamentary achievements:

- **Divi Lighthouse:** Sanctioned ₹10 lakh in the Third Five-Year Plan to rebuild the ruined British-era lighthouse at Gollalamoda, expanding its beam to 15 miles.
- **Hydrographic Survey:** Facilitated surveys of the Krishna River estuary and coastline (1962–63).
- **Infrastructure:** Developed road networks across Divi, Bandar, and Kaikaluru taluks, including a 14-mile road between Pamarru and Kankipadu.

Local Government and Party Leadership

- **Vice Chairman, Krishna Zilla Parishad (1963–1969)**.
- **General Secretary, Andhra Pradesh Congress Committee (1969–1972)**.
- **President, Avanigadda Samithi (1970):** Elected unanimously.
- **Founder, *Navina Andhra* (1954):** A national fortnightly newspaper promoting Gandhian ideals.

Cabinet Minister (1972–1983)

Krishna Rao was elected unopposed to the Andhra Pradesh Legislative Assembly from the Avanigadda constituency in 1972, attracting the attention of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.

- **Minister for Social Welfare and Fisheries (P. V. Narasimha Rao Cabinet):** He voluntarily requested the Social Welfare portfolio, surprising political peers who considered it minor. He reorganized Social Welfare into a independent secretariat department, instituted state incentives for inter-caste marriages, secured LIC backing to build 55,000 houses for the poor, and established modern nylon-net and boat supply programs for fishermen.
- **Minister for Education and Cultural Affairs (Jalagam Vengala Rao Cabinet):** Introduced *Guru Pujotsavam* (Teachers' Day honors), reformed state examinations, established the Official Language Commission to implement Telugu at the taluk level, and founded the **Balala Academy** (Children's Academy) in March 1976.
- **Minister for Cooperation (K. Vijaya Bhaskara Reddy Cabinet, 1982)**.

Key Achievements and Contributions

Promotion of Telugu Language & Culture

- **First World Telugu Conference (1975):** Conceived and directed the inaugural *Prapancha Telugu Mahasabhalu* held in Hyderabad during Ugadi 1975. Delegates from over 16 countries and various Indian states attended.
- **International Telugu Institute:** Established to maintain cultural and educational links with overseas Telugus.
- **State Anthem:** Popularized Sri Sankarambadi Sundarachari’s song *"Maa Telugu Thalliki Malle Poodanda"* and earned it recognition as the official state anthem.
- **Global Telugu Diaspora:** Encouraged the 2nd World Telugu Conference in Malaysia (1979) and 3rd in Mauritius, earning titles like *Telugu Data* (Malaysia) and *Telugu Ratna* (TANA, USA). He founded TASC (Overseas Telugu Service Center) to aid the diaspora.

Diviseema Development ("Architect of Modern Diviseema")

Krishna Rao introduced critical public utilities and civil infrastructure to Avanigadda and the surrounding Diviseema region:

- **Infrastructure & Services:** Established a Munsif Magistrate Court, RTC Bus Depot, Fire Station, LIC Sub-Division, government hospitals, and veterinary clinics. Introduced electricity, telephone services, and protected drinking water schemes (some in collaboration with Canadian aid).
- **Irrigation & Agriculture:** Built flood embankments (*Varada Katta*) along the Krishna River and Gunderu drainage; expanded the Puligadda aqueduct; installed the Edurumondi pumping scheme; and reclaimed over 30,000 acres of wasteland through 400 cooperative farming societies, benefiting 11,000 poor families.
- **Education:** Founded the Avanigadda Degree College, Junior College, Hindi Pracharak Training College, Fishery Industrial Ashram School, and Puligadda Residential School.

Gandhi Kshetram

On 2 October 1969 (Mahatma Gandhi's birth centenary), Krishna Rao raised funds and constructed two facilities in Avanigadda, founding **Gandhi Kshetram**. It evolved into a hub for social welfare, hosting training centers for Amber Charkha, tailoring, tape weaving, cloth dyeing, vocational training, a printing press, a post office, the *Diviseema Mahila Sangham*, and the *Krishnaraya Library*. CPI General Secretary Chandra Rajeshwar Rao described Gandhi Kshetram as a "Rural University".

1977 Diviseema Cyclone Relief Work

On 19–20 November 1977, a catastrophic cyclone and 20-foot sea surge devastated Diviseema, killing an estimated 10,000 people and wiping out entire villages.

Moving through piles of corpses and debris, Krishna Rao immediately mobilized relief operations. He resigned his ministerial position to devote his full attention to the victims, asserting that his cabinet post was an impediment to frontline service.

Using Gandhi Kshetram as a command base, he coordinated national and international relief organizations—including Mother Teresa, CARE, Ramakrishna Mission, RSS, Red Cross, Epikok, AWARE, and the Divine Life Society. He organized mass cremations, fed thousands from public kitchens, built storm shelters, reconstructed villages, and arranged group marriages for survivors. For his selflessness, he was awarded the *Prabhakari Award* for Best Social Worker; he donated the ₹10,000 prize money directly back to the trust. Former Chief Minister Bezawada Gopala Reddy remarked that while Bihar had Rajendra Prasad during its earthquake, Diviseema had Mandali Krishna Rao during its cyclone.

Stand on *Jai Andhra* Movement (1972–1973)

During the violent *Jai Andhra* agitation demanding the bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh, Krishna Rao was one of only three ministers from the Andhra region (along with Bhattam Srirama Murthy and L. Lakshman Das) who stood firmly for a unified state (*Samaikyandhra*).

Because Krishna district was the epicenter of the separatist movement, Krishna Rao faced severe backlash:

- Separatists cut phone lines and blocked his home in Avanigadda, subjecting his family to a four-month boycott.
- Protesters burned tar drums on the runway at Gannavaram Airport to prevent his plane from landing.
- He survived a mob assault on Tank Bund in Hyderabad and two bomb attacks. Near Movva, a mob stoned his car; a Dalit supporter took the impact of a stone to protect him.

Despite immense pressure, he maintained that splitting the Telugu-speaking populace would cause endless disputes over waters and assets. When unity was eventually restored, former critics recognized him as a *Samaikya Veerudu* ("Hero of Unity").

Personal Life and Ideology

Lifestyle and Principles

Krishna Rao led a austere, simple life. He wore coarse khadi shirt and dhoti with leather sandals, maintained a vegetarian diet, and had no personal vices.

- **Refusal of Garlands:** Upon learning that poor laborers spent their entire daily wage (₹3) to buy welcoming garlands for him, he took a lifelong vow never to accept flower garlands.
- **Bus Travel:** Preferring to remain close to the public, he frequently traveled by public RTC buses rather than official ministerial cars.
- **Financial Integrity:** Upon taking office as minister, he established the practice of submitting full declarations of his bank balance and personal assets to the Chief Minister and Prime Minister. He surrendered 10% of his salary during economic emergencies.
- **Bhoodan:** On 20 June 1973, he donated 5 acres of his personal 7.17-acre land holding to 10 landless poor families. He also distributed a 5-acre plot granted to him by the government under the freedom fighter quota. He declined a railway pass, freedom fighter pension, or government housing in Hyderabad.

Family

On 19 May 1952, Krishna Rao married Prabhavati Devi. At their wedding, the couple donated money to the Rayalaseema Drought Fund, the Congress Newspaper Fund, and a political training camp.

They had four children:

- **Sons:** Mandali Buddha Prasad (former Deputy Speaker of the Andhra Pradesh Legislative Assembly and MLA) and Satya Prasad.
- **Daughters:** Annapurna and Revathi.

Literary Legacy

Krishna Rao was a skilled orator and author. Among his written works was the book *Vayojana Vidya* ("Adult Education"). Jnanpith laureate Viswanatha Satyanarayana dedicated verses in the preamble of his magnum opus *Srimad Ramayana Kalpavriksham* to Krishna Rao, praising his pure nature and deep friendship.

Later Life and Death

Following a severe car accident in August 1984, Krishna Rao’s physical health began to decline. In his later years, he withdrew from active politics, expressing distress over the decline of ethics in political life. He turned toward spirituality and built a Shirdi Sai Baba temple in his village.

Mandali Venkata Krishna Rao passed away in Hyderabad on **27 September 1997** at the age of 71.

Legacy and Honors

- **Puligadda–Penumudi Bridge:** Krishna Rao long advocated for a bridge connecting Puligadda and Penumudi. Following his death, his son Mandali Buddha Prasad led a public campaign to complete the project. Chief Minister Y. S. Rajasekhara Reddy named the completed structure the **"Sri Mandali Venkata Krishna Rao Varadhi"**.
- **Official Language Commission:** On the occasion of Krishna Rao's birth centenary, Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu officially renamed the state language body as the **"Mandali Venkata Krishna Rao Official Language Commission"**.
- **Titles:** Honored as *Diviseema Gandhi*, *Telugu Ratnam* (USA), *Telugu Data* (Malaysia), and *Divi Seema Bhagiratha*.